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First-world aspirations and feminism translocation: In search of economic and leftist alternatives[1]

Although being one of the most primitive systems of classification in social sciences, a division of the world into three regions (Sachs 1976) stuck to the social imagination of the Soviet Bloc inhabitants and other regions for years.[2] The three-world concept appears to have originated with a French demographer Alfred Sauvy who used it for the first time in 1952 (Purvis 1976). Ever since then, the interests and biases of the Western civilization towards socialist societies of the Eastern Bloc were named, and the *signified* (after Ferdinand de Saussure 1959) of the "second-world" was used essentially until the end of the Cold War. In this mental shortcut, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries were perceived as backward, polluted, and characterised by a shortage economy and controlled by Moscow (Berend 2009). Even though in the popular *imaginarium* (after Jacques Lacan 1996) every inhabitant of the "first-world" had full access to its resources and luxuries, we know today that equality of classes was not, and still isn't, an attribute of capitalism and that the post-war affluence in the United States of America and Western Europe was a direct outcome of government spending and high taxes – both emblematic of Keynesian economics. A system essentially based on redistribution, providing all the inhabitants with equal opportunities in social and political life, turned in Western countries in the 1980s into a free market system, mainly through the influence of the Chicago school of economics (Perkins 2005, Klein 2007: 7). Milton Friedman's "Capitalism and Freedom" (2002[1962]) was an inspiration not only to conservatives in the United States and Tories in the United Kingdom, but also to many economists in the CEE countries (Kowalik 2009, Balcerowicz 2014).

[1] This is a translation of my article written in Polish that is currently under review in an academic journal.

[2] In this chapter I am focusing on those Soviet Bloc countries which transformed into Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s, i.e. on the "second-world" perspective, with particular attention to Poland. I admit, though, that an analysis of the way particular regions of the world are perceived by other regions as well as the images and narratives generated by cold-war media and propaganda is quite interesting and could potentially be the subject of research in the future.

A promise of freedom in the title was the main cause of the radical neoliberal shift in Poland in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tadeusz Kowalik (2009: 25-41) explains that the change originated with a surge of anti-regime sentiment among individuals associated with the Solidarity movement (previously operating illegally for eight years), their naive "trust in the benefits of the free market" and the "enfranchisement of *nomenklatura*", i.e. emergence of private companies based on the resources of state-owned companies and the individuals previously in managerial positions becoming directors in the newly-established companies. The massive transfer of state property into private hands and – as Kowalik puts it – "clientelist and corruption-prone beginnings of Polish capitalism" were examined by a number of intellectuals (Kuroń and Żakowski 1997, Kowalik 2009). Polish capitalism is not, however, merely a large-scale privatisation process or surrendering to the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus (Williamson 1989) implemented by Leszek Balcerowicz in less than six months – a practice now known as "shock therapy" (Klein 2007). First-world aspirations of the CEE countries also included permitting freedom of speech, respecting human rights and building a democracy. These values were referred to by grant-making bodies and moneylenders such as the World Bank (Central and Eastern European Program (ECEP) established in 1989 (WB 1990)), International Monetary Fund (offering loans aimed at assisting integration of planned economies with capitalist ones (Stone 2002)), U.S. Agency for International Development (offering programs that promoted strong market economies as well as developing institutions that strengthen democracy (USAID 1999)), or European Funds (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies and Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States). I could venture a hypothesis that during the transformation, the funds that found their way into NGOs, including women's organizations, were comparable to the "hearts & minds" strategy carried out by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (Polman 2011: 198-199). In the case of post-Soviet states, the role of "soldiers" was played by American advisors who implemented draconian prescriptions of the aforementioned Washington Consensus on the one hand and, on the other, were "fixing roofs and handing out candy", meaning they were talking about democratisation and women's rights. Were they truly the first to mention these aspects?

In this chapter I examine the attractive and troublesome translocation of feminism to Poland and other CEE countries. This process was bound up with neoliberal thought and the "first world" aspirations discussed above, on the one hand, yet it brought up the questions of immense importance to women (e.g. discrimination or violence), on the other. The struggle for women's rights as well as the operation of women's movement in the CEE countries with reference to neoliberalism is discussed briefly in the following part of the chapter. My observations of economic reality and the strengthening conservative mood of public opinion in some countries of the CEE region encouraged me to include possible alternatives to the current policy directions later in this paper. Therefore, the remaining sections are devoted to feminist economics and necessary social and cultural changes –

that the new left needs to consider in order to curb the tendency of a massive conservative "turn to the right" in the CEE countries and improve women's lives.

Feminism and neoliberal thought in Poland and in CEE

The first feminist initiatives in Poland, introduced by Professor Renata Siemieńska among others, took place in the late 1970s (Penn 2005: 77). They were informal actions undertaken mostly by groups of women students and academic teachers who criticised both the government and the "Solidarity" resistance movement. Women associated with "Solidarity" did not belong to these groups because, as Shana Penn observes, until a Women's Division was created in 1989, a lot of them "would never think of asserting feminist values" (Penn 2003: 255). The emphasis on traditional, conservative values pertaining to family also resulted from the involvement of catholic church with the opposition. Penn also mentions that "in their own company, the young men and women treated one another with respect which helped them survive tough times. (...) These people created a political family, a community, their own specific enclave. Such was the class of '68" (2003: 250). Wanda Nowicka adds that "(i)f someone would tell me then about the problem of sexism, I would not consider it the most important issue. I was convinced that the most important struggles were those for freedom and independence, other issues left for later" (Penn 2003: 253). The first official feminist organizations were established only after the "Law on Associations" had taken effect in 1989. Although not every association and foundation established in the 1990s in the CEE countries can be characterised in the same manner as it was done by Kristen Ghodsee in her "Feminism-by-Design" article (2004), a number of aspects were interpreted correctly. Indeed, many single women's organizations and whole networks operating in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland or Ukraine)[3] received funds from agencies mentioned above, presenting matter and carrying out projects that conformed to the views of sponsors (cf. Gal and Kligman 2000). The projection of the western model of feminism, called "cultural feminism" by Ghodsee (2004), was associated with the introduction of "gender assessments", creating "gender action plans" and pursuing the strategy of "gender mainstreaming", coupled with pathologizing women's position and their lives in the Real-socialist era (Charkiewicz 2007). Even today, many people in the region misunderstand the term "gender" and perceive feminism as an alien and undesirable ideology which, admittedly, does frequently challenge religious doctrine. On the other hand, a considerable number of women scholars, NGOs, women politicians and activists identify with feminist demands. They call for a bigger representation of women in politics (only one woman – Grażyna Staniszewska – took part

[3] I was working for one of such networks operating in the region in the years 2004-08. The network has an office in Poland, therefore my considerations concern mostly Polish women's organisations, but due to my close cooperation with other women's organisations in CEE, some of my observations also cover other countries.

in the 1989 Polish Round Table Talks as an official representative), in managerial positions in both private and public sectors, equal pay for equal work and a more equal division of unpaid housework among household residents. Not everyone in Poland applauded the growing influence of catholic church after 1989 and mass protests against penalization of abortion (even though a call for a referendum on that issue was signed by 1.7 million people, the lower house of the Polish parliament did not even consider it (Borejza 2006)) indicated that a lot of people were concerned with women's issues. Topics such as domestic violence, rape, trafficking, mobbing and discrimination, dismissed or suppressed until 1989, now found their way into public space. Although these concerns are presented pejoratively as "essentializing themes" by some American scholars (e.g. Cerwonka 2008: 819), they were of colossal importance to many women in the region. Unfortunately, emphasising the idea of a monolithic identity of women without taking individual differences into account, with gender regarded as superior to other components of identity (among others things, such as age, disability, rurality, ethnicity, and socio-economic location) and the neoliberal rhetoric of a "self-made man" as the only progressive and proper course of development, was becoming more and more apparent. The same process was taking place across the Atlantic, widely criticised by left-wing feminists who opposed "'negotiation within' capitalism" (Cotter 2002). In an interview by Monika Bobako (Fraser 2008), Nancy Fraser details some of the changes she observed: "(m)ovements such as feminism, though initially trying to combine social and cultural demands, were quietly turning their attention to the latter. What little remained of the new left transformed into movements seeking recognition and started gravitating towards politics of identity" (Fraser 2008: 52-53). Demonizing the "socialism" era also resulted in negating its achievements such as striving for full employment, granting women access to prestigious occupations such as judges, professors and physicians as well as guaranteeing government assistance in caring for dependents (access to day care, preschools and medical facilities). In accordance with the tenets of competition and effectiveness, in the name of the same arguments, in which the benefits of the welfare state were introduced, namely social justice and legality (after Zygmunt Bauman 2006: 99), the dismantlement of public services began in the CEE countries. In the popular consciousness it became common to believe that persons who did not use these services should not pay taxes on them, e.g. public health system or social assistance (e.g. alimony fund). The perception of this new approach as "just", ignored the fact that the system is based on social solidarity, and the poor and the disadvantaged are not at fault. Commenting on the introduction of an anti-abortion law in Poland and the state alimony fund being discontinued, Katarzyna Szumlewicz states: "Poland has become a proverbial 'women's hell' in which feminist movements do not fight for some equality paradise and female self-fulfilment, but have to demand that the very basic women's rights are respected, and not, as it has been since 1989, consistently stripped away" (2004: 231). At the same time, women from Central and Eastern Europe had to struggle against an image of them being

backward and conservative people, failures of the transformation. That was one of the reasons the emphasis was being put on booming entrepreneurship of women, even though this trend of switching to self-employment was a direct result of mass layoffs. In the meantime, the media promoted the image of a modern woman as an emancipated, flexible and rich consumer who, thanks to new technologies (mobile phones and laptops gaining in popularity), could be glued to her professional work 24 hours a day. In Poland, women's organizations also expressed their support for women entrepreneurs (e.g. candidacy of Henryka Bochniarz, the president of the Polish Confederation of Private Employers Lewiatan, for the president of the country in 2005) and for attempts at reshaping women's skill sets to meet the demands of free market economy. A quick examination of the titles of the Congress of Women panels, organised in Warsaw since 2009, is quite telling. Little attention is paid to women socially and economically excluded, or those involved in labour unions, almost as if women's movement was an equivalent to non-governmental organizations. Annual *Manifas* in Poland are organised by informal groups, bringing together members of academia as well as activists from leftist, anarchist, labour and women's organizations. The organizations themselves change as well, many women managers having leftist views, support nurses and midwives in their protests or back the establishment of labour unions for supermarket workers. Today, some of the feminist organizations have also a different attitude towards economic change. They are critical of the process of competing for grants they are involved in, as well as the ideology behind funding for particular projects, the distribution of which depends on a party's whim. The involvement of parties, in connection to the continuing since 2012 "war on gender" controversy, does not work to the advantage of feminist organizations. Further, a turn to the right can be seen not only in Poland, but also in Slovakia, Hungary and Western European countries such as Germany or France (The Economist 2014). There are many reasons for this shift. It is partially attributed to a crisis of symbolic identity among the inhabitants of these countries, torn between conservatism and fluent modernity (Žižek 2009: 40). It is also connected with the fear of minorities perceived as threatening the (imagined) purity and unity of European nations (Appadurai 2009). Now the processes of steoretypisation and drawing lines between "us" and "them", which serve the consolidation of the subjectivity of right-wing groups, intensified after refugees from Syria and other Global-South countries were allowed to cross over into Western Europe. Finally, the change resulted from a fierce opposition to a "modern and western" neoliberal-style progress. And these are the circumstances in which feminist economics can be of assistance.

Feminist economics as an alternative to the dominant economic thought

Feminist economics, as one of heterodox approaches to economics, is a criticism of and an alternative to the mainstream economic trend that is currently neoclassical economics, also known as neoliberal economics. In Central and Eastern Europe academics use the

theoretical and empirical works of people connected with, among others, "Feminist Economics" Journal, giving lectures on gender and conducting research projects in the region (Petrová et al. 1995, Łapniewska 2014). The most important feature of their work is moral and political judgement of described phenomena from the feminist epistemology point of view, on which the adopted methodology is also based (it combines quantitative and qualitative methods). Feminist economists oppose the "rational, economic man" model (Nelson 1996) set at the core of economic analyses and instead they call for the inclusion of women as subjects and objects of economic inquiries. At the same time they avoid treating women as a homogenous group, but through the intersectional approach (Hankivsky 2012, Łapniewska 2015) they recognise their diverse socio-economic status, belief, age, disability, psychosexual orientation, ethnic origin, support within their local environment and other elements of identity. In addition, they focus on areas traditionally disregarded in macroeconomic accounts. For example, projects that described unpaid women's work and concentrated on gender budgeting were conducted among others in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (Outlá 2007, Łapniewska et al. 2013). Feminist economists focus as well on reformulating macroeconomic goals in such a way as to be guided by the ethics of care (Tronto 1995). Such approach emphasises interpersonal relationships, reciprocal responsibilities and the importance of building social and emotional bonds with other people as the prerequisites of one's development and well-being, contrary to the assumption of mainstream economics that everyone strives to maximise their profits only. Feminist economics concentrates on sustainable development and creating equal opportunities for participation and well-being for current and future generations instead of bolstering quick economic growth here and now.

In my opinion, the most serious challenges posed by neoliberalism that the CEE countries have to face are consumerism and individualism. Feminist economics is well equipped to address these challenges. Consumerism opposes welfare state not only by demanding tax cuts and creating the illusion of choice of products (the state does not offer), but above all – it creates the *homo economicus* attitude, focusing solely on one's own interest. In this respect all the solidarity systems such as healthcare or education, which should serve everyone no matter their financial standing, are now undermined because of their "communist origin". Zygmunt Bauman indicates that the social security services were created because people were not convinced that they would not find themselves in a difficult situation (2006). However, as Eva Illouz points out in her book "Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism", in our times one can sense an overwhelming influence of "a narrative of identity which promotes, now more than ever, an ethos of resourcefulness" (Illouz 2007: 42), therefore neither state support nor social networks are needed. Another factor that contributes to that process is therapeutic discourse, which has gained widespread media coverage. It has "incorporated one of the major – if not the major – narratives of identity, namely the narrative of getting by" (2007: 43). In the CEE countries this narrative has been

enhanced through the struggle against the image of "failures of the transformation" as well as against the ghost of the passive *homo sovieticus* (Zinoviev 1985). These struggles are counterproductive, as it was aptly observed by Elizabeth Dunn: those "(b)asic rules that determine what it means to be a person – an individual, 'accountable', responsible, self-managing person – mean that many workers blame themselves, not their firms or the national economy, when they are being disciplined at work or sacked" (2004: 7). In many Central and Eastern European countries the view "winner takes all" was uncritically embraced. The outcome, as one could expect, is that guilt never enters the minds of employers when they are exploiting workers and refuse to share the profits with them (Piński 2016). At the same time these workers, exploited as they may be, cannot count on trade unions support, as unions are either persecuted (employers hinder their activities) or their creation is "unofficially" forbidden (employers threaten employees with dismissal if they attempt to establish one).

Feminist economics accepts vulnerability and describes people's interrelationships, including care that is required or provided, so that societies could reproduce and everyone would have an opportunity to live a good life (Elson 1998, Budlender and Sharp 1998). Rejecting the "choice" approach by feminist economists (who has a choice after all? the excluded?) in order to guarantee equal rights serves the primary goal of feminist economics – having a real influence on policy change and being able to improve women's lives. This is the reason behind feminist economics going beyond monetary calculations and referring to such notions as freedom, participation, quality of life, meaning, diversity or ecology (Goodwin et al. 2005, Power 2004). It is probably quite obvious at this point that the focus areas of feminist economics correspond closely to traditionally leftist economy programs and so – they are far from free-market solutions. In Poland, however, some of these programs, after the disappointment with the social-democratic party (SLD)[4], have been hijacked by the catholic church and its followers in conservative parties, and those parties now proclaim a return to a strong welfare state. Obviously, it is an outcome of, among others, the aforementioned political make-up from the era of Polish People's Republic in which the catholic church played a vital role. Yet, it is very upsetting that today the only opposition against conservatives comes from the neoliberal parties such as Civic Platform

[4] A large number of SLD members are former members of the Communist Party and throughout all these years since 1989, they have not been able to create a clear ideological identity (Borecki 2009). In addition, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (SLD), supported by the leftist Council of Ministers and the leftist parliament at that time, sent troops to Iraq in 2003 despite massive protests in the country, which then continued for years. Contrary to their campaign promises, before Poland joined the EU in 2004, to gain favour with the Polish Episcopate, SLD abandoned their legislative efforts to liberalise the anti-abortion law. Also, one year after the government had changed, a scandal broke (called Oleksy gate) surrounding a recording of a conversation between former leftist prime minister Józef Oleksy and Aleksander Gudzowaty, a wealthy entrepreneur. Prime minister maintained that, among other people, president Kwaśniewski gained some of his fortune illegally. He continued to cast aspersions upon his party, stating that it was SLD who introduced capitalism in Poland and that party members never had the interest of the country at heart, caring only about their own private issues. There was no hope in rebuilding trust in the institutional left in Poland. There are no left-wing representatives in Polish parliament today.

(*Platforma Obywatelska*) and Modern (*Nowoczesna*). They may have a liberal outlook on life, but they are sure to take the welfare system apart even further.

Awaiting the new left

Not everyone equated "first-world" aspirations of Poland and other CEE countries with transforming their economies into a market economy as proposed by anglo-saxon countries. Kowalik describes a visit to Stockholm from a study group of the Economic Advisory Council (*Konsultacyjna Rada Gospodarcza*) to the Polish government in January and February 1989 (2009: 110-112). Despite the fact that the Council wrote a 700-page report "giving a quite detailed description of how Poland can make use of this country's experiences" (ibid.), the document went public only in June 1989, which was after the Polish Round Table Agreement. The Agreement itself, especially the "New Economic Order" project (Salamonowicz 1989: 14-18) which was based on self-government and worker participation among other things, was quietly dismissed as Poland "dove into the free market" (Kowalik 2009: 110). Cooperation and participation is not a novel concept in Poland. It was mentioned as early as during the Partitions period by Edward Abramowski (1907), and Andrzej Leder brings up the example of farmers from the former Prussian Partition territories who insisted on creating cooperatives in the interwar period (Leder 2014: 138-139). The idea of community was crushed after the Second World War as belonging to various cooperatives became obligatory. For the same reason the aversion to State Agricultural Farms, reinforced during the transformation period, lasts to this very day. Meanwhile, and quite contrary to this image, in the past couple of years over 1200 social cooperatives were established in Poland (MRPiPS 2014) and this continued fast-paced growth of this sector should be applauded and backed both by the new left and feminist economists in the region.

Another issue that largely went unnoticed, but now is steadily gaining in popularity in the world, is governing the commons that remain outside the traditional division into private and state-owned. These goods and services (commons) take a variety of forms, from abandoned spaces (e.g. parks) to services exchange in so-called time banks (called *Tauschkreise* or *Tauschringe* in Germany (Wagner 2009)). Silvia Federici, mentioning the feminist dimension of creating care commons, states that they can be the foundation for a new method of management (Federici 2012). This focus by the new left on cooperation as well as on governing the commons (including participatory budgets) would undoubtedly form a new trend which, apart from the obvious strengthening of the welfare state, would aid the process of building a coherent identity.

Slavoj Žižek insists that the left needs to stand out and cannot be blackmailed by neoliberals into cooperation just because there is the need to fend off conservatives (Žižek 2009: 41). The areas that feminist economics concentrates on could well be the elements that would differentiate the left from the rest of the political spectrum. We also need to acknowledge that thus far the person at the centre of left-wing discussions was a man

and, as it is pointed out by Ewa Majewska and Janek Sowa, "neither the rights of women and sexual minorities nor battling social inequalities caused by a rapid and ruthless transition to market-oriented economy did ever attract the attention of the 'left-wing' parties" (Majewska and Sowa 2007: 18). There is progress in that matter, one example being the creation of Together party (*Razem*), in the fashion of Spanish *Podemos* or Greek *Syriza*. Together does not essentialise women and cares about their interests being represented.

There is also an obvious need for the left (and feminism) in Poland to reinforce those symbols which go beyond the omnipresent and solidified in the social *imaginarium* mantra "god, honour, fatherland". These symbols would also be helpful in all the battles over values which keep storming through the parliament, their purpose being to serve as a smoke-screen for important social and economic problems. Maria Janion argues that in order to achieve that, the symbolic sphere needs to be transformed and it is necessary to develop bonds and foster solidarity among women (Janion 2009). The need for this solidarity is affirmed by Marta Frej, an artist: "if you take demonstrations on women's issues – on tightening the anti-abortion laws, on mothers of handicapped children, on mothers-entrepreneurs whose maternity benefits were to be cut down dramatically, on alimony dodgers – or the protests of violence victims. How many women feel solidarity with other women?" (Frej 2016: 10). Unfortunately, not that many. Leder (2015) also points to equality and freedom as concepts upon which one could build social capital and which could become the basis for shaping a modern Polish identity. He believes that such voices may be heard once conservative symbolism is drained and then compromised (Leder 2015: 23). However, the ideas alone will not suffice. As Illouz puts it, "cultural ideas are weak if they exist solely in our minds. They have to crystallise around objects, rituals of interaction and institutions" (2010: 72). Thus, solidarity, equality and freedom mentioned above can remain empty signifiers unless they contribute to the creation of new secular communities and ties between women. Such groups may re-define identity symbols and create new ones, which could be reflected in public space (in the form of monuments, names of the streets etc.) and institutions (e.g. changes in education programmes, law, economic policies). Only then there is a chance for change that would guarantee equal rights for men and women as well as unrestrained participation in social and economic life. Perhaps thanks to the new leftist grassroots movements it will one day become a reality.

Conclusion

The inspiration for this chapter came from a series of publications about women's organizations and academic feminism in the time of political change in the CEE countries, authored mainly by American women scholars. Since I did not agree with some of the claims which they had made, I decided to weave my voice into the existing series of publications on this subject. In this chapter I trace the origins of Polish capitalism, linking it with the "first world" aspirations and separating it from the initial feminism translocation that took

place in the 1970s. Later, I described the political changes invoked by neoliberalism in the 1990s in the CEE countries and the recent consolidation of conservative groups. Also, witnessing the current "turn to the right" in many European countries, I decided to combine deliberations on feminist economics with a vision for the new left which, because of the historical and social context, has to overcome many difficulties. The struggle over symbols I described pertains first and foremost to Poland – an essential fact, considering that every country in the region is different and, in accordance with the standpoint theory, the narrations created by women of all the "second-world" countries are important. In my view, it is also high time to rid ourselves of the "second-world" complex and stop making comparisons with others. Instead, we should relish the comfort of our own space that we can shape, women and men as equals, using feminism as an idea that undergoes transculturation, meaning it can be adapted and used according to our specific context (Pratt 1992: 6). There is a pressing need for women solidarity here. Finally, we have to remember that the concept of feminism refers to more than just gender identity, as Fraser cautions us: "(in) the United States, for instance, feminists and multiculturalism advocates kept having their myopic discussions on identity and difference, essentialism and antiessentialism, and in the meantime neoliberals and christian fundamentalists, united in a grim alliance, were taking over the country!" (Fraser 2008: 59)

Translation: Stefan Łapniewski

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